

Ten Rules for Using Indexes

1. "An index is only an index. It is not a substitute for the record being indexed
2. "The larger the size of the index, the more easily pertinent listings are overlooked.
3. "In a given record, any vowel may at any point be substituted for any other vowel or consonant.
4. "Virtually every pre-World War II record, in whatever form we see it today, originated as an attempt by an individual to put on paper what he or she thought was heard.
5. "There is no perfect indexing system.
6. "It doesn't matter how you spell the name; it only matters how the indexer spelled it.
7. "Just because an index is described as complete or comprehensive doesn't mean it is complete or comprehensive.
8. "If you haven't found it in the index, you can only conclude that you haven't found it in the index. You cannot conclude that it's not in the record.
9. "The index isn't always at the back of the book.
10. "Sometimes it is best to ignore the index altogether.¹"

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Mr. Hansen's words clearly express how we feel sometimes as we use indexes. In the online indexes for the US Census records, it is not unusual for my last name to be spelled with "sey" by the indexer, but in the Census record itself it is spelled "say." I have learned to search it with the wildcard "*" or search it as a "Soundex" entry. I have found that sometimes when my ancestor is not listed in the US Census index for a given year nonetheless it is in the actual census pages. I just need to take the time to look through all the pages for that enumeration district, township, etc. Surfing through the census records can pay off.

As you search indexes you have to think of the variety of ways the surname will be spelled. In the "Lindsay" family history, "Lindsay" has 86 different spellings. One man did a study of the Census records for the State of Missouri from 1850 through 1930. If I only spelled "Lindsay" as Lindsay, I would get just 41% of the Lindsay family name listings for Missouri from 1850 to 1930. I have started to use "Lin*y," "Lin*s*y," and "Linds*y" when I search Ancestry Library Edition. Be creative on how you search your surname.

A good example of an "attempt by an individual to put on paper what he or she thought was heard" is my aunt Adnelle. In the 1920 US Census for Nebraska, it is spelled as "Nedbell," and in the 1930 US Census it is spelled as "Adaolle." Another example is my father, "Harry," that is spelled "Herry" in the 1920 census.

Lindsay

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¹ *Der Blumenbaum, SGGS*, Volume 23, Number 4: April, May, June 2006, p. 184